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The Media Fight the Red Menace

In the make-believe world of the media, swarthy hordes are dangerous, but Red hordes have been even worse. For decades, Communists were the diabolic enemies made for Hollywood and television. In fact, in all their various embellishments, the Communist demon was made largely *by* Hollywood and television.

Witch-Hunts and Stereotypes

From its earliest days, the motion-picture industry, like every other corporate enterprise, was hostile toward the Russian Revolution, domestic Communism, and labor unions. Putting these together, we get Bolshevik labor organizers in America who commit villainous acts—as seen in about a dozen silent films during the 1920s. They plant bombs, disrupt workplaces, and foment strikes. Luckily, they are always foiled by the authorities or by the film’s hero.¹

The advent of talkies provided additional opportunity to propagate negative stereotypes about Russian Communists and the Soviet Union. Two examples, *Ninotchka* (1939) and *Comrade X* (1940), offer almost identical plots: a debonair “Free World” male pursues an icy Russian female. In *Ninotchka*, Greta Garbo plays the humorless, puritanical, slogan-spouting Communist, a stock character to be seen in many subsequent film and television productions. Unlike most celluloid Reds, however, Garbo is eventually softened and humanized by the blandishments of bourgeois love and luxury.

During the World War II alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union, Hollywood turned out several openly pro-Soviet films, produced at the encouragement of President Roosevelt, who was report-



In *Ninotchka*, Greta Garbo plays a humorless, puritanical Communist who sensibly warms to the blandishments of bourgeois love and luxury.

edly interested in “flattering” Joe Stalin in order to keep him fighting.² Among these, *The North Star* (1943) gave rare recognition to the courage displayed and sacrifices made by the Soviet people against the Nazi invasion. Another film, *Mission to Moscow* (1943), was based on the experiences of Joseph Davies, the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1936 to 1941. This picture presented the Soviet side of the story regarding the prewar years, including the Russo-Finnish war and the Hitler-Stalin treaty.

After the war in 1947 and again in 1951, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) launched a full-blown investigative campaign against “Communist influence” in Hollywood. HUAC had a number of goals:

First: expose movies that were “Communistic” or “sympathetic to the Communist point of view.” Aside from the few openly pro-Soviet World War II pictures, none was actually found, unless one counts the various liberalistic pro-New Deal motion pictures that some committee members denounced.

Second: prevent any further production of films that harbored “un-American” views and dealt with social issues in a manner that might be detrimental to free-enterprise ideology. Even though HUAC found little to justify its anticommunist inquisition, it did succeed in imposing a chill on Hollywood’s already lukewarm desire to make movies that explored iconoclastic political themes.

Third: purge leftist screenwriters, directors, and actors from the industry. Here the congressional inquisitors succeeded quite well. “Many progressive film-workers were driven out of the industry. . . . A few committed suicide, some were imprisoned, others went into exile, and many merely went underground. Those who continued working avoided political subjects or social issues.”³

Fourth: curb labor militancy in Hollywood. Along with exercising

The Political Purge of Hollywood

During [the House Un-American Activities Committee] hearings, thirty members of the Hollywood community—in desperate and often unsuccessful attempts to save their jobs—named nearly three hundred of their colleagues as members or former members of the Communist Party. With communism appearing to be rampant in the film industry, the studios panicked and began cranking out anti-communist movies—which mostly contained old gangster movie plots, except that the gangsters were now replaced by communists who machine-gunned patriotic Americans and then sped off in fast cars. Two movies, Richard Widmark’s *Pickup on South Street* and George Raft’s *A Bullet for Joey*, actually portrayed the Mafia teaming up with the police to fight zombie-like communists. . . .

In the end, HUAC blacklisted or

“graylisted” nearly two thousand artists in the motion picture, radio, and television industries. . . .

Meantime, [led by its president Ronald Reagan] the Screen Actors Guild [SAG] joined the “Crusade for Freedom,” a counterattack against “communist lies and treachery.” Reagan, saying that SAG would not defend those actors who defied HUAC, told his SAG colleagues, “It is every member’s duty to cooperate fully.” . . . Two years later, SAG would force its membership—and those applying for membership—to sign loyalty oaths, saying, “I am not now and will not become a member of the Communist Party nor of any other organization that seeks to overthrow the government of the United States by force and violence.”

Dan Moldea, *Dark Victory: Ronald Reagan, MCA, and the Mob* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1986), pp. 74–75.

an ideological control, the corporate-loving members of HUAC were interested in smothering the bitter labor agitation that the motion-picture industry was experiencing. Of course, the studio bosses cooperated fully with the committee's red-baiting of the Screen Writers Guild.

Fifth: make more anticommunist films. In 1947, HUAC members J. Parnell Thomas and Richard Nixon prodded the movie moguls to enter the fray against the Red Menace. Louis B. Mayer hastily rereleased *Ninotchka*, one month after the HUAC hearings. In short time, Hollywood joined the cold-war crusade with a score of Grade B, second-feature, anticommunist flicks that were usually financial disasters.⁴ In this instance, ideology took precedence over box-office considerations. As Nora Sayre notes:

For certain film makers, being asked to work on an anti-Communist picture was like a loyalty test: if someone who was thought to be a Communist refused to participate in the project, it was assumed that he must be a Party member. So, for some writers, directors, and actors, taking part in a film such as *I Married a Communist* was rather like receiving clearance—it meant they were politically clean. . . . The number of movies concerning other social issues decreased drastically between 1947 and 1954, although more than fifty anti-Communist films were produced.⁵

The efforts of the House Un-American Activities Committee should remind us that something more than entertainment was at stake. The committee correctly understood that the entertainment media was an important part of popular culture, and popular culture was a real factor in shaping popular consciousness, including political consciousness.

The image of the Communist as represented in these films and in the television dramas of the 1950s bore little relation to reality but fit well into the ideological stereotype. In movies such as *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Married a Communist* (1950), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), and *My Son John* (1952) and in the television series "I Led Three Lives" (1953–56) and numerous other TV spy and adventure stories, American Communists were portrayed as murderers, political assassins, terrorists, saboteurs, bank robbers, arsonists, blackmailers, racists, and—perhaps worst of all in the eyes of some witch-hunters—intellectuals.

In reality, there have been no documented instances of members of the Communist Party, USA, engaging in the kind of violent crimes portrayed in the media, although some members certainly have been guilty of being intellectuals. In real life, the party has a proud record of struggle for peace, East-West disarmament, industrial unionism, racial

justice, and civil liberties. Party members were at the forefront of the CIO organizing drives of the 1930s, in the fight for civil rights and desegregation, and in the fight against the Ku Klux Klan and lynch-mob terrorism. Convicted under the Smith Act for “conspiring to teach and advocate the violent and forceful overthrow of the government,” a number of Communist party leaders went to jail. Some such as National Chairman Gus Hall served upwards of nine years, not for acts of murder or sabotage, but for their political beliefs.

The media-made Communists of the 1950s are grim, unsmiling martinets who bark commands at lesser comrades and need to have jokes explained to them. They are cruel to animals and to each other. They prey upon impressionable and idealistic youth. They use sex to entice sweet young things (male and female) into the party—but they apparently never use sex for procreation, for they always seem to be childless. They rant and spout ideological slogans and talk (or, rather, snarl) about “bringing America to its knees” and “taking over this country.” Their goal, according to Herbert Philbrick in “I Led Three Lives,” is to “control everything and everybody by any means.” These Reds are behind just about every labor-management conflict in America, instigating the otherwise contented but easily misled workers into such apparently un-American activities as strikes. Often Communists can be detected by their manner of cigarette exhalation: “they expel smoke very slowly from their nostrils before threatening someone’s life, or suggesting that ‘harm’ will come to his family.”⁶

Of course, these media-made American Communists are not really American. Their loyalty is to Moscow and their work dovetails with the foreign spies and saboteurs who seem to be everywhere. In the 1950s the Soviet Union was depicted in both the news and entertainment media as plotting to conquer the United States, either by subverting it from within or by obliterating it with a nuclear attack. In 1956, CBS went so far as to televise a pseudo-documentary, “The Day North America Is Attacked.” Using newscaster Walter Cronkite as the announcer and numerous real-life military officers who played themselves, the network and the Pentagon depicted the U.S. military response to a Soviet nuclear bomber attack.⁷

As in news reports, so in the entertainment media—U.S. espionage is portrayed as a patriotic defense, while Soviet espionage is treated as proof of the Kremlin’s aggressive intent. *Our* spies do heroic things to thwart the enemy. *Their* spies commit odious acts to undermine and conquer us. Week after week during the fifties, in television series such as “Passport to Danger,” “David Harding, Counterspy,” “I Spy,” and “The Man Called X,” the Free World’s undercover heroes penetrated

the Iron Curtain to rescue freedom-loving people, demolish Communist secret bases, and vanquish the Soviet agents. The efforts of the CIA, the military, and other government agents were supplemented by patriotic private citizens like the corporate executive in the television series "Biff Baker, U.S.A." His business affairs took him all over the world, enabling him to close deals for his company while doing a little espionage and sabotage for his government, thereby serving global capitalism in more ways than one.⁸

When it came to anathematizing Communism, the media has enlisted God, as well as the government and the military. Hollywood producer Cecil B. deMille, the very same individual who told others to use Western Union if they wanted to send a message, wove anticommunist messages into his own films, drawing upon a celluloid religiosity to do so. In his remake of *The Ten Commandments* (1956), he appears in the prologue before a golden curtain to deliver a little lecture to the audience about "the theme of this movie." The question is, he says, "Are men the property of the state? Or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today."⁹

Television did its share in blending religiosity and anticommunism, offering an array of religious inspirational shows. Thus, we had "Zero-1960," produced by a fervent anticommunist organization called the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima. Nationally syndicated from 1957 to 1960, the show was more concerned with the horrors of atheistic Communism than with the joys of religion.¹⁰

From the mid-sixties to about the mid-seventies, a period of détente in U.S.–Soviet relations, the Soviets were less likely to be portrayed as the arch-villains in the news and entertainment sectors of the media. Indeed, they were sometimes made into not-such-bad-guys. Thus, in the television series "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." (1964–68), the American and Soviet agents actually team up under the aegis of an international law enforcement agency to fight a sinister crime organization plotting to control the world.

Rambo and the Reaganite Cinema

Not until the 1980s did the media war against the Red Menace again reach full force in both the news and entertainment sectors, faithfully following in the wake of the anti-Soviet propaganda campaign that was being conducted by the White House. The far right was back in the saddle, declaring the end of the noninterventionist "Vietnam syndrome" and the return of a mortal cold-war struggle with the Soviets.

President Reagan and his associates denounced Moscow as the “evil empire,” the center of “international terrorism,” and the source of “all the unrest” in the world.¹¹ On cue, Hollywood and the networks went into action. Here is a light sample from the “Reaganite cinema” produced in that era:

The Soldier (1982). The Soviet KGB threatens to blow up half the western world’s petroleum supply with a nuclear device it planted in Saudi Arabia—unless the Israelis evacuate the West Bank in forty-eight hours. The Israelis refuse to budge. This upsets the U.S. president, who then decides to nuke the West Bank in order to vacate it and thereby save Western oil. The KGB are everywhere, having penetrated the highest reaches of the CIA itself. Luckily, a CIA counterterrorist team, who look like Young Republicans, side with the Israelis and refuse to knuckle under. They go in and kick Russkie ass. Moral of the story: Don’t be led around by the spineless politicians in Washington. (Better to be led around by the tough ones in Jerusalem and Langley, Virginia.) Give the Soviet aggressors the only thing they understand: a bullet in the belly and a gun butt in the face.

Missing in Action (1984). Chuck Norris escapes from a Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp years after the war. He then returns to Vietnam with a sidekick to liberate the other MIA-POWs from the clutches of the sadistic Vietnamese, who cackle a lot and simply cannot shoot straight. One wonders how they ever won the war. Norris shows how to fight the Vietnam war and win it this time—with individualistic heroics. Then came *Missing in Action II: The Beginning* (1985), literally the same stuff: Norris again escapes from a POW camp. He has trouble staying out of them. He rescues others, kills commies, refights the war, wins it yet again. Then in *Braddock: Missing in Action III* (1988), Norris returns to Vietnam to rescue his wife, kill commies, refight the war, etc.

There are over 78,000 missing-in-action servicemen from World War II. Nobody believes they are being held captive in beer cellars in Germany or Toyota factories in Japan. They are dead. So are the more than 2,000 MIAs from the Vietnam war. Hollywood reached a low point when it joined the Reagan administration’s campaign to play upon the unrealistic hopes of bereaved families in order to fuel yet another anticommunist theme.

These films not only refight the Vietnam war, they rewrite it. Once more history is stood on its head, as the roles of aggressor and defender are reversed. Never a word is said about the colossal destruction and suffering wreaked upon the Vietnamese civilian population in a war of attrition by U.S. firepower many times greater and even more indiscriminate than that utilized in World War II.

The Public Believes Hollywood

Back in 1977, the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, chaired by Republican Representative Sonny Montgomery, concluded that "no Americans are still being held alive as prisoners of war in Indochina" and that "a total accounting by the Indo-chinese governments is not possible and should not be expected."

[Conservative activists], aided by a stream of Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris movies, have come to believe otherwise, and 82 percent of respondents, according to a recent Wirthlin poll, think American prisoners are still being held in Southeast Asia.

The Nation, June 4, 1988, p. 791.

An accounting of the Reaganite cinema should also include *Firefox* (1982), *Dangerous Moves* (1985), *White Nights* (1985), *Born American* (1986), and *Bulletproof* (1988), movies populated by ruthless KGB agents and brutish Soviet military who are bested by the individualistic heroics of two-fisted Americans or, as in *White Nights*, a heroic anticommunist Russian emigré.

The most notable representations of this genre are the Sylvester Stallone productions, beginning with *Rocky IV* (1985). The comedian Jay Leno once said that performers like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone deserve a lot of credit for having "opened up the acting profession to people who couldn't get into it when speech was a major requirement." Certainly this is true of Stallone's *Rocky IV*, the story of a highly inarticulate boxing champ, Rocky Balboa, who goes international to take on the Soviets. The Soviet boxer is a Nazi-style killing machine, created by high-tech training methods that include steroids and blood-doping. He kills Rocky's friend, African-American boxer Apollo Creed, in the ring to the delight of bloodthirsty Soviet spectators. Naturally, Rocky vows vengeance. Wearing American-flag trunks and facing a snarling Soviet crowd, Rocky demolishes the sub-human, superhuman Soviet boxer. The crowd, including the Politburo members and Soviet leader Gorbachev, do an ideological flip, rising as one to applaud their new hero, Rocky, who stands in the ring and instructs them on the meaning of world peace with such elegantly enlightening lines as: "It's how youse feel about me and I feel about you! Dat's wha' counts!" One critic observes:

As the fine line between Hollywood and the U.S. government grows even fainter, the actions of political leaders take on more of the character of wild fantasy and Hollywood films become more absurdly “political”—there is hardly a difference between a Reagan speech and a Rocky monologue.¹²

Stallone’s celebration of a Reaganite cinema achieves its apotheosis in the Rambo series. *First Blood* (1982) introduces us to John Rambo (Stallone), another strung-out Vietnam veteran, an ex-Green Beret. Rambo gets into a scrape with a small-town sheriff who treats him brutally. This triggers bad memories of Vietnam, causing Rambo to go wacko. Things escalate into a one-man war against the police and the National Guard. In the last scene just before he surrenders, Rambo finally explains himself to his old Green Beret commander.

It wasn’t my war. You asked me, I didn’t ask you. I did what I had to do to win, but somebody wouldn’t let us win. And I come back to the world, and I see all those maggots at the airport protesting me, calling me a baby-killer and all kinds of vile crap. Who’re they to protest me? Back there I could fly a gunship, I could drive a tank. I was in charge of million dollar equipment. Back here I can’t even hold a job.

Rambo, First Blood II (1985) finds our hero in the slammer because of the things he did in the previous movie. But he’s given a deal: a presidential pardon if he goes to Vietnam, photographs his old POW camp, and shows that there are no more MIAs. He goes and finds Americans still being held prisoner. (Oddly enough, he does not run into Chuck Norris.) The officials back in Washington are embarrassed. They wanted him not to find any Americans missing-in-action so the issue could be put to rest. They order that Rambo be left to his fate in the jungle. (In real life, if Reaganite officials could have come up with a real, live MIA still being held in Vietnam, they would have joyfully squeezed every bit of propaganda advantage out of it.) Betrayed by the Washington bureaucrats and abandoned in this hostile environment, Rambo is captured and tortured by the Soviets. He escapes, liberates all the POWs, and then kicks, punches, and shoots his way to freedom, all the while being pursued by napalm-tossing Soviet helicopters. Armed with a bow (and arrows that explode), a serrated knife as big as a machete, and an occasional machine gun, Rambo kills the entire Vietnamese army and a battalion of Russians. He is assisted in this extraor-

dinary feat by the fact that his adversaries all seem to be legally blind. They fire thousands of rounds at him and never so much as fluff his hair.

This Rambo rampage has enough distortions to keep any honest critic busy for a week. In reality: (1) The Vietnamese exchanged POWs with the United States after signing the Paris Peace Agreement, which ended the war. Since then, they have cooperated in trying to find the remains of MIAs. (2) U.S. prisoners-of-war were not tortured by the Soviets as depicted in the film. Torture was a regular practice of the South Vietnamese and U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam. (3) The Soviets did not drop napalm on anyone in Vietnam—it was the U.S. military that dropped large amounts of napalm and Agent Orange, mostly on the civilian population.

Rambo III (1988), opening in a record 2074 theaters throughout America, finds our hero in Afghanistan, where he singlehandedly kills scores of Russians. The film appeared just at the time the Soviets were withdrawing from Afghanistan. Rambo invades a Soviet fortress deep in

In *Rambo III*, our hero rescues a friend and fights his way out of a fortress inhabited by sadistic Russians who like to torture people and murder little children. Luckily, Rambo kills them all.



that country to rescue a friend, pausing only to squeeze an arrow out of his gut and cauterize the wound on an open flame. The Soviets are portrayed as sadists, rapists, and torturers who murder little children with explosive toys (a horror story originally propagated by the CIA). For fun, Rambo sends a Soviet captive plummeting with a noose around his neck to his death in a cave shaft, then for still more fun, Rambo dynamites him. Rambo gets along swell with the *mujahedeen* killers, feudal landowners, fundamentalist Islamic fanatics, and opium growers (all known in the United States as the "Afghan freedom fighters").

By the end of this third and worst of the Rambo films, our hero seems to have mellowed out. He gives his good-luck charm to an adoring twelve-year-old Afghan boy soldier, who himself is shown killing Russians on several occasions. War has been a healing, nurturing experience for Rambo, a rehabilitation through violence. He's found himself. As the movie ends, you feel he's going to move on, maybe head back to the States, buy a trailer, hunt bear, settle down and get married, join the National Rifle Association, and open up the nicest little gun shop in Texas.

Rambo's *Mujahedeen* Buddies in Real Life

Soon after the offensive at Jalalabad began March 7, there were reports of government troops being slaughtered after they surrendered or were captured. In one case, as Western journalists watched, a truckload of prisoners being escorted by relatively moderate rebels was stopped by extremists who casually shot the captives to death.

[Another report:] A motor column was supposed to bring dozens of women, children and old people from Jalalabad to Kabul. The buses and trucks were stopped by "a band of Afghan extremists" led by Saudi Arabian advisers. The drivers were lined up on the shoulder of the highway and

shot. Small children were held up by their hair, shot in the face and their corpses thrown into Kabul River. Pretty women from the convoy were dragged off into the mountains by the rebels. The rest of the refugees were shot on the spot.

[The so-called free tribesmen, who go back and forth across the Afghan-Pakistan border on camels, have told stories of being kidnapped, separated from their wives and children and forced to fight for the *mujahedeen*.]

Dispatches from Afghanistan in the *Los Angeles Times* and other sources, as reported in Alexander Cockburn's column in the *Nation*, June 12, 1989, p. 803.

On second thought, it is not likely that Rambo would marry. Women do not figure big in his life. He channels his testosterone into more gratifying things like homicidal violence. Why fuss with females when you can get a bigger rush from killing Russians? Happiness is a warm gun.

When a woman does appear in movies about swarthy hordes or spies or vicious Reds, she is usually a seductive sexpot who turns out to be an undercover agent for one side or the other. Or she is merely an accessory, attached to the hero—quite literally, being yanked along by him a pace behind in heels and skirt, as they flee danger. Sometimes she is the U.S. ambassador's beautiful daughter or a reporter or just the hero's most recent sexual acquisition. In any case, she has a genius for getting herself into perilous predicaments from which she must be extricated by the hero. While occasionally allowed to hold or even shoot a gun in self-defense, she does it gingerly, as befitting her gender-typed deportment. More often she just stands uselessly aside, anxiously watching her hero fight off a platoon of attackers.

In *Rambo III*, women are so superfluous as to be altogether absent. In real life, many of the Afghan *mujahedeen* took up arms alongside their feudal landowners and opium growers because they bitterly opposed the laws favoring female education and emancipation promulgated by the Soviet-supported Kabul government. The Afghan "freedom fighters" believe a woman's place is in the tent. Rambo has no problem with that.

Images of Soviet aggression found sensationalist expression in movies like *Red Dawn* (1984) and *Invasion USA* (1985) and in television mini-series like ABC's "Amerika" (1987), all of which portray imaginary Soviet invasions of the United States. Coauthored by the self-described "Zen fascist" and war lover John Milius, *Red Dawn* tells how the Soviet Union, plagued by crop failures and food riots, launches a nuclear attack against Washington, D.C., and then occupies America's agriculturally rich heartland. The Soviets are assisted by domestic collaborators and by Cuba and Nicaragua, who have emerged as major military powers in the Western hemisphere. Luckily, in a small town in Colorado where most of the citizens have been murdered or sent to indoctrination camps, a group of youngsters escape to the hills, from which they launch armed attacks that make mincemeat out of the enemy. In the end, the "Wolverines," as they call themselves, carry out a suicidal raid to free other American youths, who then flee across the Rockies to unoccupied "Free America."

Invasion USA offers a variation on the same theme. Uniformed troops from the USSR, Cuba, and an unidentified Arab country disem-

bark undetected on a Miami beach on a bright moonlit night. With the unimpeded ease of international drug smugglers, they pile into waiting trucks and fan out across the country. During this escapade, one of the Communist invaders sneeringly describes the Americans as "soft, spineless, decadent. They don't even understand the nature of their own freedom or how we will use it against them." The infiltrators commit terrorist acts that turn neighbors against each other and against the police. Nobody in America seems to grasp what is behind these strange doings. Nobody seems to know really what the danger is. Nobody, that is, except Chuck Norris, who eventually manages singlehandedly to rally outnumbered U.S. troops for a showdown fight that wipes out the invaders. Once again, we owe our salvation to individualistic heroics and abundant applications of violence.

In ABC's fourteen-hour television mini-series, "Amerika," a United-Nations army, led by the Soviets who dominate that organization, takes over the United States. The occupying army massacres large numbers of innocent people and puts even larger numbers into internment camps. America is turned into a Soviet satellite. Actually, after ten years of occupation (it is 1997), Soviet "Amerika" bears an ironic resemblance to Reagan's America. Sports and other propaganda are used as tools to distract the masses. Homeless people forage for food. Farmers complain of losing everything after years of hard work. Unemployment, alcoholism, and drug addiction are serious problems. Supposedly none of this existed until the Russians started messing up the American way of life.

Such films turn history on its head. The Soviet Union has never invaded the USA, nor has Cuba or Nicaragua. Rather, it is the other way around. The United States has invaded Cuba and Nicaragua and also Soviet Russia. In 1919–1921, the United States joined a fourteen-nation expeditionary force in an attempt to overthrow the revolutionary government in Russia. The invaders failed in their goal, but not until they had taken a terrible toll in lives and property. Most Americans are astonished to hear of it. This invasion of Soviet Russia remains something of a blank page in our school texts. Nor, to my knowledge, has there ever been so much as a movie or television story based on these events.

In order to justify one's own hostility toward others, one portrays "them" in the most negative way. "We want peace but they are aggressors; they want to bury us," goes the old refrain. It is always an embarrassment when the "enemy" acts like a friend, calling for talks, trade, arms limitations, cultural exchanges, and peaceful relations—as the Soviets kept doing through the decades after World War II and most effectively in the 1980s. To maintain public support for U.S. global

interventionism and a huge military arsenal, our leaders often dismissed such overtures as just so many subterfuges designed to throw us off our guard.¹³ Certainly the make-believe media have done their share in the campaign to nourish anticommunism, militarism, and nation-state chauvinism. In a promotional video for one of his Rambo movies, Sylvester Stallone, unlike most filmmakers who pretend they are not involved in ideological matters, openly described his movie as political: "I hope to establish a character that can represent a certain section of the American consciousness."¹⁴ He succeeded all too well.

Red-Bashing on Madison Avenue

TV advertisers, keeping their eyes firmly on the evil empire, [have been] introducing a new technique: Red-bashing. Miller Lite beer was first. . . . They're showing an émigré Soviet comedian, surrounded by new capitalist pals at a bar, telling us he loves America and the wonderful things he's found here, including unopened mail. "Also," he says, "in America you can always find a party. In Russia, Party always finds you."

Then came MCI, the long-distance telephone service. . . . Its ads are set in a fish market somewhere in frozen Siberia. Its hero (or antihero) is a solitary consumer battling an implacable bureaucratic machine. The theme is anything but elusive: These poor folks have no choice in the goods and services they buy, much as Americans presumably had no choice in the bad old days when there was just A. T. & T. . . . "Fish no good," our beleaguered hero complains. "No refunds," comes the stern reply. . . .

The latest entry is Wendy's, the hamburger chain. Wendy's sce-

nario is a fashion show behind the Iron Curtain in which an enormously fat model parades the same plain cloth dress. . . . The outfit's the same every time Olga comes down the runway. Only the accessories vary: In the beachwear version, she carries a beach ball. For evening-wear, she totes a flashlight. Hovering over the scene is a dim portrait of Lenin. Wendy's point is much the same: There's no choice over there. But there is here. . . .

A little levity in the East-West dialogue might not be a bad thing. It's nice, too, to be reminded that there's more choice here than in say, Irkutsk. But are these the products to demonstrate that wonderful truth? Sure, you can have Miller Lite. You can also have several other virtually identical lights. MCI vs. A.T.&T.? Well, it seems [A.T.&T.'s] prices are coming down while its competitors' prices are going up. And one fast-food burger is much like another.

Michael Olmert, *New York Times*, December 22, 1985.

As Communism disappeared from much of Eastern Europe, replaced by right-wing anticommunist regimes, and as it receded in the USSR itself, the Red-Menace, Soviet-bashing films began to seem out-dated. When *The Hunt for Red October* (1990) appeared, it was prefaced with a disclaimer, reminding the audience that the film referred to events that (supposedly) occurred in pre-perestroika cold-war days. When Communists invite western capital into their countries and convert their socialist economies into "free-market" capitalism, they are no longer considered evil because they are no longer anticapitalist. But the end of the cold war and the decline of Eastern European state socialism does not mean the end of rabid anticommunism as far as the leaders of our national security are concerned. There are still popular revolutionary forces in Central America and elsewhere that threaten overseas corporate investments, thereby inviting U.S. interventionism and counterinsurgency. And as long as such conflicts continue, they are likely to invite media productions about the dangers of leftist revolutionaries, narco-terrorists, and the like.

The Wide Weird World of Sports

Even the media's coverage of sporting events can provide occasions for anticommunism, militarism, and jingoism. In professional wrestling—or what passes for wrestling on television—we are treated to Hulk Hogan, whose promotional video couples military might with national chauvinism—specifically, a missile flying out of an American flag. Other "Wrestlemania" characters like "Iron Sheik," "Abdullah the Butcher," and "Haiti Kid" manage to debase Third World peoples, as does "Harpoon," a dark African-looking man who is not a crowd favorite. Perhaps worst of all are "Junk Yard Dog," an African-American dressed in a dog collar and chains, and "Rowdy Roddy Piper," who describes himself as the "last great White hope." Then there is "Nikolai Volkov," who would enter the ring and sing the Soviet anthem, which he could scarcely finish for all the boos and profanities the fans hurled at him. By 1990, as the international scene changed, so did Nikolai's act. He now wore a red jacket that had not only a hammer and sickle but a U.S. flag on it. Before one match, he was presented with a huge American flag. He waves it proudly and shouts, "God Bless America." How did he feel holding the flag, an announcer asks. "I never feel better in my life," he answers. The crowd cheers its approval.

Team sport contests between the United States and the USSR have provided ample opportunity for televised flag waving and Red bashing.

When the U.S. Olympic hockey team defeated a second-string Soviet team at Lake Placid, New York, on December 9, 1983, the ABC Nightline announcer crowed: "The Americans withstood an all-out Soviet assault." In an aftergame interview, U.S. coach Lou Vairo said he had told his players they "have something the Russians don't have . . . the American belief we can succeed at anything we do." Had the Soviets claimed such a faith in their own invincibility, it would have been taken as evidence of their implacably aggrandizing intentions.

When the Soviet Union beat the USA in basketball in the 1988 Summer Olympics, NBC treated it as the end of civilization as we know it. In post-game commentaries, NBC announcers described an American team seriously handicapped by insufficient practice time and the loss of a key player and thus unable to withstand "the Soviet onslaught." The Soviets, it seems, "never let up their attack," and were a "relentless juggernaut." The impression left was that the American players were facing the Red Army rather than another basketball team.

Reporting on the Washington Redskins' Superbowl victory in 1983, a *Washington Post* sportswriter rejoiced that "the capital of the Free World" now had a "world champion team." The writer suggested that the Redskin offensive line should be sent to President Reagan because they were "of such size, strength and irresistibility that they could carry the MX missiles around the desert" and "run the you-know-whos out of Afghanistan."¹⁵

Presidents of the United States make a regular practice of injecting their presence into sporting events. Ronald Reagan relied on a rehearsed script filled with painful quips when doing his public relations stint before fifty million TV sports viewers. In a split-screen telephone call to Los Angeles Raiders' coach Tom Flores immediately following the Raiders' 1984 Superbowl victory, Reagan said that "Moscow just called about Marcus Allen [the Raiders' running back]. They think he is some new secret weapon and they demand he be dismantled." And as if that weren't hilarious enough, Reagan added: "We could put your Raiders into silos—then we wouldn't need MX missiles." Thus the president associated a Raiders victory with White House militarism. He never thought to suggest that Allen and the Raiders be used as goodwill emissaries between the two superpowers.

The conclusion of the 1985 World Series found President Reagan once more milking a warmed-up audience of fifty million by calling the winning team for an after-game chat. Picking up on the ideological subtext, Kansas City manager Dick Howser told the president, "We think we did it the American way, with good hard work."

The media's telecasting of the Olympic games has been marked by

blatant chauvinism. It is one thing for American viewers to favor their own country in international athletic contests, but quite another to be urged to do so by the media. The networks project an image of U.S. athletic superiority, focusing preeminently on American Olympic contestants to the neglect of those from other countries, including many who might give decidedly superior performances. There is also usually lack of coverage of events in which Americans are not favored or not engaged.

The Olympics are supposed to promote international good will and an enjoyment of the capabilities of athletes from all nations, not a shrill nationalism. ABC's coverage of the 1984 Summer Olympics was so shamelessly lopsided as to evoke an official reprimand from the normally placid International Olympic Committee. Similar complaints were registered by South Korean officials regarding NBC's coverage of the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul.

In a word, even a sector of the entertainment media such as sports reportage, which has no narrative line, can be permeated with anticommunist, militaristic, and chauvinistic imagery.

It should be evident by now that the political distortions of the entertainment media can be measured not only by what is said but by what is left unsaid. Aside from a few exceptional productions, the motion-picture and television industries have eschewed any treatment of the exploitations, atrocities, and other injustices perpetrated by the defenders of the "Free World" against peoples of the Third World. As in school textbooks, mainstream academic research, political life, and news media, so in the entertainment media: the United States global military and economic empire is nowhere to be seen; instead we have America the innocent, the just, an America threatened and even invaded by vicious adversaries. But also an America—as embodied by individual macho heroes—that gets tough against aggressors when the chips are down, kicks ass, wins the Vietnam war, and stops being soft on Communism and terrorism, an America that knows how to defend its way of life with fascistic violence. Thus, are the crimes and oppressions of the empire hidden from the empire's own people, who are themselves among its victims and among the consumers of its mythology.¹⁶